

TITLE OF THE INVENTION
IMAGE FORMING APPARATUS AND TONER DISCHARGE CONTROL
METHOD

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

5 This application is based upon and claims the
benefit of priority from the prior Japanese Patent
Application No. 2002-202433, filed July 11, 2002,
the entire contents of which are incorporated herein
by reference.

10 BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

 The present invention relates to an image forming
apparatus, such as a copying machine, a facsimile or a
printer, which forms an image using electrophotography,
15 and to a mixed toner discharge control method.

2. Description of the Related Art

 Jpn. Pat. Appln. KOKAI Publication No. 2001-188394
discloses a technique relating to cleaning of toner in
a developing device in a color image forming apparatus,
20 in a case where toner of a previously developed toner
image is reversely transferred and mixed in the
developing device that subsequently develops a toner
image.

 According to this technique, in an image forming
25 apparatus having a plurality of image forming sections,
when an image ratio of an image formed in one of two
adjacent image forming sections, which is disposed at

a rear stage, is lower than an image ratio of an image formed in the image forming section at a front stage, the image forming section at the rear stage operates to forcibly consume a developer, in addition to toner consumption in an ordinary image forming operation.

This technique, however, has the following problem.

For example, in an image forming apparatus that performs image formation using four color toners, assume that image forming sections, the number of which is equal to the number of colors, i.e. four, are provided. In this technique, only the operation of the image forming section, which has performed an image forming operation immediately before, is monitored. Thus, no consideration is given to mixing of toner in image forming sections that form third and fourth toner images, relative to the image forming section that forms a first toner image. As a result, even if toning of color tone of toner images formed in the third and fourth image forming sections has varied, forcible discharge of developer is not performed.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

An advantage of an aspect of the present invention is to provide an image forming apparatus and a mixed toner discharge control method, which can constantly maintain the toning of color tone of toner images by discharging mixed toner at a suitable timing, even if

a previously formed toner image mixes in an image forming section that performs a subsequent image forming operation.

5 The invention may provide an image forming apparatus comprising: a first image carrying body that carries a first electrostatic latent image; a first developing device that develops the first electrostatic latent image formed on the first image carrying body into a first toner image, and removes excess toner on
10 the first image carrying body; a second image carrying body that carries a second electrostatic latent image; a second developing device that develops the second electrostatic latent image formed on the second image carrying body into a second toner image, and removes
15 excess toner on the second image carrying body; a third image carrying body that carries a third electrostatic latent image; and a third developing device that develops the third electrostatic latent image formed on the third image carrying body into a third toner image,
20 and removes excess toner on the third image carrying body, wherein the third developing device performs a toner discharge operation on the basis of a result of a comparison between one of an integrated area of the first toner image and an integrated area of the second
25 toner image, on the one hand, and an integrated area of the third toner image, on the other.

 The invention may also provide a mixed toner

discharge control method for an image forming apparatus having a first developing device that performs development using a first toner, a second developing device that performs development using a second toner, a third developing device that performs development using a third toner and a fourth developing device that performs development using a fourth toner, wherein a toner image using the first toner is first formed on paper supplied, following which a toner image using the second toner is formed in an overlapping manner, a toner image using the third toner is formed in an overlapping manner and then a toner image using the fourth toner is formed in an overlapping manner, the method comprising: controlling a discharge operation for the first toner mixed in the second developing device, in accordance with an integrated area developed by the first developing device and an integrated area developed by the second developing device; controlling a discharge operation for the first and second toners mixed in the third developing device, in accordance with an integrated area developed by the first developing device, an integrated area developed by the second developing device and an integrated area developed by the third developing device; and controlling a discharge operation for the first, second and third toners mixed in the fourth developing device, in accordance with an integrated area developed by the

first developing device, an integrated area developed
by the second developing device, an integrated area
developed by the third developing device and an
integrated area developed by the fourth developing
5 device.

Additional objects and advantages of the invention
will be set forth in the description which follows, and
in part will be obvious from the description, or may be
learned by practice of the invention. The objects and
10 advantages of the invention may be realized and
obtained by means of the instrumentalities and
combinations particularly pointed out hereinafter.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWING

The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated
15 in and constitute a part of the specification,
illustrate presently preferred embodiments of the
invention, and together with the general description
given above and the detailed description of the
preferred embodiments given below, serve to explain
20 the principles of the invention.

FIG. 1 is a block diagram showing a main structure
of an image forming apparatus according to the present
invention;

FIG. 2 shows an image forming section according to
25 a first embodiment of the invention;

FIG. 3 is a flow chart relating to an image
forming operation of the image forming apparatus;

FIG. 4 is a first flow chart illustrating a timing of necessity/non-necessity determination of a discharge operation;

5 FIG. 5 is a second flow chart illustrating a timing of necessity/non-necessity determination of a discharge operation;

FIG. 6 is a third flow chart illustrating a timing of necessity/non-necessity determination of a discharge operation;

10 FIG. 7 is a first flow chart relating to necessity/non-necessity determination of a discharge operation;

15 FIG. 8 is a second flow chart relating to necessity/non-necessity determination of a discharge operation;

FIG. 9 is a third flow chart relating to necessity/non-necessity determination of a discharge operation;

20 FIG. 10 is a diagram of images formed of yellow, magenta, cyan and black toners; and

FIG. 11 is a diagram of images formed by overlapping in succession a magenta toner image, a cyan toner image and a black toner image on a sheet on which a yellow toner image is formed.

25 DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

An embodiment of the present invention will now be described with reference to the accompanying drawings.

FIG. 1 is a block diagram of a main structure of an image forming apparatus 1 according to an embodiment of the invention.

5 The image forming apparatus 1 comprises a scanner section 101, a control section 102, and an image forming section 105. The control section 102 includes an operation control section 103 and an image processing section 104.

10 The scanner section 101 reads an image on a color original and generates image data on the basis of color information relating to red, green, blue and black. The scanner section 101 outputs the image data to the control section 102.

15 The image processing section 104 of control section 102 converts the input image data to image data of four colors, yellow, magenta, cyan and black.

20 The operation control section 103 of control section 102 receives the converted four-color image data and controls the image forming section 105 on the basis of this data, thereby performing a control for forming a toner image on paper P.

FIG. 2 shows a detailed structure of the image forming section 105.

25 The image forming section 105 includes a first process unit 100a, a second process unit 100b, a third process unit 100c and a fourth process unit 100d.

A photosensitive drum 1a of the first process unit

100a is rotated in a direction of an arrow in FIG. 2.

A charging device 3a for negatively charging the surface of the photosensitive drum 1a is disposed to face the surface of the photosensitive drum 1a.

5 An exposing device 5a is disposed at a position where the exposing device 5a faces a part of the photosensitive drum 1a charged by the charging device 3a, when the photosensitive drum 1a is rotated, and exposes the part to form an electrostatic latent image.

10 A developing device 7a is disposed at a position where the developing device 7a faces the part of the photosensitive drum 1a on which the electrostatic latent image is formed by the exposing device 5a, when the photosensitive drum 1a is rotated, and applies
15 a developer contained in the developing device 7a to the electrostatic latent image, thereby developing it into a toner image. The developing device 7a has a developing roller 37a.

20 A convey belt 13 for conveying paper P is disposed at a position where the convey belt 13 comes in contact with the part of the photosensitive drum 1a on which the electrostatic latent image is developed into the toner image by the developing device 7a, when the photosensitive drum 1a is rotated.

25 The convey belt 13 is rotated by a driven roller 15 and a driving roller 17, and conveys the paper P from an upstream side to a downstream side.

The upstream side and the downstream side, in this context, refer to an upstream side and a downstream side in the direction in which the convey belt 13 conveys the paper P.

5 The convey belt 13 attracts, by electrostatic force, the paper P charged by an attraction device 19. In order to stably maintain electrostatic force between the convey belt 13 and paper P, the driving roller 17 and driven roller 15, which are in contact with the
10 convey belt 13, are electrically grounded. The driving roller 17 rotates in the direction of arrow i, and thereby the driven roller 15 rotates in a direction of arrow j following the rotation of the driving roller 17. The convey belt 13 is rotated at a speed equal to
15 the peripheral speed of the photosensitive drum 1a. The convey belt 13 is provided with a belt cleaner 16 (to be described later).

 A transfer device 9a that transfers the toner image from the photosensitive drum 1a to the paper P is
20 disposed to face a surface of the convey belt 13, which is opposite to the other surface thereof facing the photosensitive drum 1a and paper P. A positive voltage is applied to the transfer device 9a. As a result, the toner image formed on the photosensitive drum 1a is
25 transferred to the paper P by electrostatic force.

 A charge erase device 11a is disposed at a position where the charge erase device 11a faces the

part of the photosensitive drum 1a on which the toner image that was transferred to the paper P was present, when the photosensitive drum 1a is rotated, and uniformly erases a charge remaining on the surface of the photosensitive drum 1a. The charge erase device 11a comprises a light-emitting element, such as an LED, which uniformly illuminates the photosensitive drum 1a:

As has been described above, the first process unit 100a comprises the photosensitive drum 1a, charging device 3a, exposing device 5a, developing device 7a with developing roller 37a, transfer device 9a, and charge erase device 11a.

Similarly, the second process unit 100b comprises a photosensitive drum 1b, a charging device 3b, an exposing device 5b, a developing device 7b with a developing roller 37b, a transfer device 9b, and a charge erase device 11b.

Similarly, the third process unit 100c comprises a photosensitive drum 1c, a charging device 3c, an exposing device 5c, a developing device 7c with a developing roller 37c, a transfer device 9c, and a charge erase device 11c.

Similarly, the fourth process unit 100d comprises a photosensitive drum 1d, a charging device 3d, an exposing device 5d, a developing device 7d with a developing roller 37d, a transfer device 9d, and a charge erase device 11d.

The second process unit 100b is disposed at a position where the second process unit 100b transfers another toner image on the paper P conveyed by the convey belt 13, on which the toner image was already transferred by the first process unit 100a.

The third process unit 100c is disposed at a position where the third process unit 100c transfers still another toner image on the paper P conveyed by the convey belt 13, on which the toner image was transferred by the second process unit 100b.

The fourth process unit 100d is disposed at a position where the fourth process unit 100d transfers still another toner image on the paper P conveyed by the convey belt 13, on which the toner image was transferred by the third process unit 100c.

The developing device 7a of the first process unit 100a contains a yellow-series (hereinafter referred to as "yellow") developer. The developing device 7b of the second process unit 100b contains a magenta-series (hereinafter referred to as "magenta") developer. The developing device 7c of the third process unit 100c contains a cyan-series (hereinafter referred to as "cyan") developer. The developing device 7d of the fourth process unit 100d contains a black-series (hereinafter referred to as "black") developer.

A fixing device 23 is disposed at a position to where the paper P, on which the toner image is formed

by the four process units, is conveyed by the convey belt 13. The toner image is fixed on the paper P by the fixing device 23.

5 The operation of the image forming apparatus 1 with the above-described structure will now be described with reference to a flow chart of FIG. 3.

10 In the first process unit 100a, when the rotation of the photosensitive drum 1a is started in the direction of arrow k in FIG. 2, the charging device 3a uniformly charges the surface of the photosensitive drum 1a (S1).

15 When the photosensitive drum 1a is further rotated so that the charged part of the surface of the photosensitive drum 1a is opposed to the exposing device 5a, the exposing device 5a exposes the surface of the photosensitive drum 1a (i.e. describes an electrostatic latent image on the surface) on the basis of the yellow image data generated by the image processing section 104 (S2).

20 When the photosensitive drum 1a is further rotated so that the part of the surface of the photosensitive drum 1a, on which the electrostatic latent image is described, is opposed to the developing device 7a, the electrostatic latent image described on the surface of the photosensitive drum 1a is developed into a toner image with yellow toner (S3). The yellow toner is negatively precharged adequately within the developing

25

device 7a.

Subsequently, the photosensitive drum 1a is rotated and the transfer device 9a is operated at a predetermined timing. Thereby, the toner image
5 formed on the surface of the photosensitive drum 1a is transferred on the paper P (S4). In this case, the paper P is conveyed by the convey belt 13 between the transfer device 9a and photosensitive drum 1a.

Toner, which has not been transferred from the
10 photosensitive drum 1a to the paper P, remains on the surface of the photosensitive drum 1a. The photosensitive drum 1a is rotated with the toner remaining thereon, and a charge on the photosensitive drum is erased by the charge erase device 11a (S5).

15 The transfer process in the first process unit 100a is described.

In an image forming operation following step S5, the charging device 3a uniformly charges the surface of the photosensitive drum 1a. The exposing device 5a
20 forms an electrostatic latent image on the charged surface of the photosensitive drum 1a. The developing device 7a develops the electrostatic latent image.

In this case, toner remaining on a part of the surface of the photosensitive drum 1a, where the
25 electrostatic latent image is not formed, is attached to the developing roller 37a and recovered by the developing device 7a. On the other hand, the toner

remaining on the part of the surface of the photosensitive drum 1a, where the electrostatic latent image is formed, remains attached to the photosensitive drum 1a along with toner supplied from the developing device 7a.

5 The paper P, on which the toner image is transferred by the above image forming operation of the first process unit 100a, is conveyed by the convey belt 13 to the position where the toner image formed by the second process unit 100b is to be transferred.

10 In the image forming operation of the second process unit 100b, the magenta toner image is transferred to the paper P, like the above-described image forming operation.

15 In the image forming operation of the third process unit 100c, the cyan toner image is transferred to the paper P conveyed by the convey belt 13, like the above-described image forming operation.

20 Finally, in the image forming operation of the fourth process unit 100d, the black toner image is transferred to the paper P conveyed by the convey belt 13, like the above-described image forming operation.

25 By these operations, the respective toner images formed by the second process unit 100b, third process unit 100c and fourth process unit 100d are transferred in an overlapping fashion on the paper P on which the toner image is formed by the first process unit 100a.

Next, the transfer process in the second process unit 100b is described.

The toner image developed by the first process unit 100a with the yellow toner is transferred on the paper P.

In the second process unit 100b, the toner image developed with the magenta toner is transferred on the paper P on which the yellow toner image is already transferred. In this case, the magenta toner image is transferred to the paper P from the photosensitive drum 1b, and at the same time toner of the yellow toner image is reversely transferred from the paper P to the photosensitive drum 1b. In other words, both the magenta toner, which is not transferred to the paper P and remains on the photosensitive drum 1b, and the reversely transferred yellow toner, are attached to the photosensitive drum 1b.

Subsequently, the photosensitive drum 1b with the toner attached is rotated, and a charge on the photosensitive drum 1b is erased. The charge-erased photosensitive drum 1b is charged once again by the charging device 3b, and an electrostatic latent image is formed on the photosensitive drum 1b by the exposing device 5b.

The toner remains attached to the surface of the photosensitive drum 1b on which the electrostatic latent image is newly formed. Toner, which is attached

to a part of the surface of photosensitive drum 1b,
other than the part with the formed electrostatic
latent image, is electrically attracted to the
developing roller 37b of developing device 7b and is
5 removed from the surface of the photosensitive drum 1b.
The yellow toner attracted to the developing roller 37b
of developing device 7b needs to be discharged to the
outside of the developing device 7b.

As will be described later in detail, in the
10 present embodiment, the necessity/non-necessity of the
discharge operation is determined at a predetermined
timing. If "necessity" is determined, a solid image of
toner (hereinafter referred to as "solid toner image")
is formed on the photosensitive drum 1b and discharged.

15 Hereafter, this determination and the discharge
operation are described together as a discharge
routine.

The mixed toner, as described above, is discharged
to the outside of the toner developing device 7b in the
20 following manner. A solid electrostatic latent image
of a predetermined size is formed on the surface of
the photosensitive drum 1b which has been uniformly
charge-erased. The solid electrostatic latent image is
developed into a solid toner image, and thus the toner
25 is discharged. Specifically, the solid toner image is
transferred to the convey belt 13. The solid toner
image transferred to the convey belt 13 is removed by

the belt cleaner 16.

As has been described above, in the second process unit 100b, the reversely transferred yellow toner on the photosensitive drum 1b is electrically attracted to the developing roller 37b and mixed in the magenta
5 toner in the developing device 7b. Similarly, in the third process unit 100c, the yellow and magenta toners mix in the cyan toner in the developing device 7c. In addition, in the fourth process unit 100d, the
10 yellow, magenta and cyan toners mix in the black toner in the developing device 7d.

Thus, the mixed toner discharge operation is suitably performed in each process unit.

As regards the timing of the execution of the discharge routine, as shown in a flow chart of FIG. 4,
15 the discharge routine is executed each time the image forming operation is completed. In this case, a solid toner image is formed on that portion of the convey belt 13, which lies between paper sheets conveyed.

20 Alternatively, as shown in a flow chart of FIG. 5, in a case where toner images are successively formed on a plurality of paper sheets, the discharge routine may be executed after image forming operations for a predetermined number of paper sheets are completed.

25 Alternatively, as shown in a flow chart of FIG. 6, the discharge routine may be executed after successive image forming operations for a single copy consisting

of a plurality of paper sheets are completed.

Alternatively, the discharge routine may be executed after a predetermined time period has passed since the last image forming operation was finished.

5 Alternatively, the discharge routine may be executed at predetermined time intervals.

 Alternatively, the discharge routine may be executed, depending on whether a toner image formation area in each process unit has reached a predetermined
10 value.

 Next, the execution of the discharge routine based on the toner image formation area is described.

 The determination by the control section 102 with respect to the necessity/non-necessity of the discharge
15 operation will be described with reference to a flow chart of FIG. 7.

 The amount of toner used in toner image formation relates to the area of a toner image. The area of a toner image, in turn, relates to an area where
20 a charged photosensitive drum surface is exposed by an exposing device and charge-erased. Thus, the amount of reversely transferred toner can be estimated from the exposure area of the exposing device. The exposure area may be found by measuring the area of the toner
25 image formed on the photosensitive drum (1a to 1d). Alternatively, it may be found by a reverse calculation of the area excluding the area of the toner image.

Further, since the exposing operation is performed based on the image data generated by the image processing section 104, the exposure area may be calculated from this image data.

5 In the first process unit 100a, the area of the surface of the photosensitive drum 1a exposed by the exposing device 5a is found by integrated calculations by the control section 102 as three values: an integrated exposure area Aab for the second process
10 unit 100b, an integrated exposure area Aac for the third process unit 100c and an integrated exposure area Aad for the fourth process unit 100d.

 In the second process unit 100b, the area of the surface of the photosensitive drum 1b exposed by the
15 exposing device 5b is found by integrated calculations by the control section 102 as at least three values: an integrated exposure area Abb for the second process unit 100b, an integrated exposure area Abc for the third process unit 100c and an integrated exposure area
20 Abd for the fourth process unit 100d.

 In the third process unit 100c, the area of the surface of the photosensitive drum 1c exposed by the exposing device 5c is found by integrated calculations by the control section 102 as at least two values:
25 an integrated exposure area Acc for the third process unit 100c and an integrated exposure area Acd for the fourth process unit 100d.

In the fourth process unit 100d, the area of the surface of the photosensitive drum 1d exposed by the exposing device 5d is found by integrated calculations by the control section 102 as an integrated exposure area Add for the fourth process unit 100d.

A mixed toner discharge operation of the second process unit 100b is determined to be "necessary" if a value, which is obtained by subtracting the integrated exposure area Abb of the exposing device 5b of the second process unit 100b from the integrated exposure area Aab of the exposing device 5a of the first process unit 100a, is not less than a predetermined value Kba (T1). This determination is based on the following consideration. Of the toner reversely transferred to the photosensitive drum 1b of second process unit 100b from the toner image formed on the paper sheet P by the first process unit 100a, a toner portion, which is reversely transferred to that part of the photosensitive drum 1b of the second process unit 100b, where the electrostatic latent image is not formed by the exposing device 5b, is mainly taken into the developing device 7b.

If the discharge operation is determined to be "necessary" in step T1, the discharge operation is performed (T2), and values Aab and Abb are restored to "0" (T3).

Similarly, a mixed toner discharge operation of

the third process unit is determined to be "necessary" if a value, which is obtained by subtracting the integrated exposure area Acc of the exposing device 5c of the third process unit 100c from the integrated exposure area Aac of the exposing device 5a of the first process unit 100a, is not less than a predetermined value Kca (T4).

Alternatively, the mixed toner discharge operation of the third process unit 100c is determined to be "necessary" if a value, which is obtained by subtracting the integrated exposure area Acc of the exposing device 5c of the third process unit 100c from the integrated exposure area Abc of the exposing device 5b of the second process unit 100b, is not less than a predetermined value Kcb (T5).

If the discharge operation is determined to be "necessary" in step T4 or T5, the discharge operation is performed (T6), and values Aac, Abc and Acc are restored to "0" (T7).

A mixed toner discharge operation of the fourth process unit is determined to be "necessary" if a value, which is obtained by subtracting the integrated exposure area Add of the exposing device 5d of the fourth process unit 100d from the integrated exposure area Aad of the exposing device 5a of the first process unit 100a, is not less than a predetermined value Kda (T8).

Alternatively, the mixed toner discharge operation of the fourth process unit is determined to be "necessary" if a value, which is obtained by subtracting the integrated exposure area Add of the exposing device 5d of the fourth process unit 100d from the integrated exposure area Abd of the exposing device 5b of the second process unit 100b, is not less than a predetermined value Kdb (T9).

Alternatively, the mixed toner discharge operation of the fourth process unit is determined to be "necessary" if a value, which is obtained by subtracting the integrated exposure area Add of the exposing device 5d of the fourth process unit 100d from the integrated exposure area Acd of the exposing device 5c of the third process unit 100c, is not less than a predetermined value Kdc (T10).

If the discharge operation is determined to be "necessary" in step T8, T9 or T10, the discharge operation is performed (T11), and values Aad, Abd, Acd and Add are restored to "0" (T12).

The predetermined values Kba, Kca, Kcb, Kda, Kdb and Kdc may be equal. However, if these values are set independently in consideration of the relationship between the amount of mixture of other color toner and the toning of color tone of the toner image formed on the paper P, a more effective discharge operation can be performed.

As described above, not only the process unit that formed the toner image immediately before (i.e. the process unit preceding by one) is monitored with respect to the toner image area. But all the process units that previously formed toner images are monitored.

When only the process unit that formed the toner image immediately before is monitored, the following problem arises. For example, there may be a case where the yellow toner image formation integrated area in the first process unit is very large, while the magenta and cyan toner image formation integrated areas in the second and third process units are very small. In such a case, the magenta toner is normally discharged, but the cyan toner is not discharged since the difference between the cyan toner image formation area and the magenta toner image formation area is small. Consequently, a large amount of mixed yellow toner cannot be discharged.

In this embodiment, all the process units that previously formed toner images are monitored. Thereby, the occurrence of this undesirable situation is prevented.

It is thus possible to prevent such a situation that the toner of the process unit that forms a third or a following toner image is not discharged and mixed toner remains. Therefore, the toning of color tone of

the toner image can be constantly maintained.

Aside from the above, another determination method is available.

5 The determination by the control section 102 with respect to the necessity/non-necessity of the discharge operation will be described with reference to a flow chart of FIG. 8.

10 A mixed toner discharge operation of the second process unit is determined to be "necessary" if a value, which is obtained by subtracting the integrated exposure area A_{bb} of the exposing device 5b of the second process unit 100b from the integrated exposure area A_{ab} of the exposing device 5a of the first process unit 100a, is not less than a predetermined value
15 J_b (U1).

 If the discharge operation is determined to be "necessary" in step U1, the discharge operation is performed (U2), and values A_{ab} and A_{bb} are restored to "0" (U3).

20 A mixed toner discharge operation of the third process unit is determined to be "necessary" if a value, which is obtained by subtracting the integrated exposure area A_{cc} of the exposing device 5c of the third process unit 100c from a sum of the integrated
25 exposure area A_{ac} of the exposing device 5a of the first process unit 100a and the integrated exposure area A_{bc} of the exposing device 5b of the second

process unit 100b, is not less than a predetermined value J_c (U4). This procedure aims at finding a toner discharge amount by taking into account the reverse transfer toner amount from both the yellow toner image formed on the paper P by the first process unit 100a and the magenta toner image formed by the second process unit 100b.

If the discharge operation is determined to be "necessary" in step U4, the discharge operation is performed (U5), and values A_{ac} , A_{bc} and A_{cc} are restored to "0" (U6).

A mixed toner discharge operation of the fourth process unit 100d is determined to be "necessary" if a value, which is obtained by subtracting the integrated exposure area A_{dd} of the exposing device 5d of the fourth process unit 100d from a sum of the integrated exposure area A_{ad} of the exposing device 5a of the first process unit 100a, the integrated exposure area A_{bd} of the exposing device 5b of the second process unit 100b and the integrated exposure area A_{cd} of the exposing device 5c of the third process unit 100c, is not less than a predetermined value J_d (U7). In this case, in the fourth process unit 100d, toner is reversely transferred from the toner image formed on the paper P by the first process unit 100a, the toner image formed by the second process unit 100b and the toner image formed by the third process unit 100c.

This, the toner discharge amount in the fourth process unit 100d is determined in consideration of the amount of reverse transfer toner from the three toner images.

5 If the discharge operation is determined to be "necessary" in step U7, the discharge operation is performed (U8), and values Aad, Abd, Acd and Add are restored to "0" (U9).

10 As described above, the necessity/non-necessity of the execution of the discharge operation is determined by considering how many toner images are already formed on the paper P. Therefore, a deficiency in the amount of discharge toner can be prevented.

15 In addition to the above-described determination methods, still another determination method is available.

 The determination by the control section 102 with respect to the necessity/non-necessity of the discharge operation will be described with reference to a flow chart of FIG. 9.

20 In this method, an overlapping part of previously formed toner images on the paper P is considered.

 The outline of this method is described with reference to FIG. 10 and FIG. 11, which schematically illustrate color images each comprising eight dots.
25 FIG. 10 shows images formed of yellow, magenta, cyan and black toners, respectively. FIG. 11 shows images wherein a magenta toner image, a cyan toner image and

a black toner image are successively overlaid on a yellow toner image on the paper P.

As is shown in FIG. 10, in the first process unit 100a, yellow toner dots are formed at dot positions 5, 6, 7 and 8. In the second process unit 100b, magenta toner dots are formed at dot positions 1, 3, 6 and 8. In the third process unit 100c, cyan toner dots are formed at dot positions 1, 2, 5 and 8. In the fourth process unit 100d, a black toner dot is formed at a dot position 4.

In this case, the necessity/non-necessity of the discharge operation in the second process unit 100b is determined as follows.

To start with, the area of the yellow toner image is found. If the area of the image is expressed by the number of dots, the area is four dots (dot positions 5, 6, 7 and 8) as shown in FIG. 10. This area is represented by Aa. Then, the area of the magenta toner image is found. The area, like Aa, is four dots (dot positions 1, 3, 6 and 8). This area is represented by Ab. An overlapping area between the yellow toner image and the magenta toner image is found. As shown in FIG. 11, these toner images overlap at dot positions 6 and 8, and thus the overlapping area is two dots. This area is represented by A(ab).

If a value, which is obtained by subtracting the overlapping area A(ab) of the yellow toner image and

magenta toner image and the entire area A_b of the magenta toner image from the entire area A_a of the yellow toner image, is not less than a predetermined value I_b , the discharge operation is determined to be
5 "necessary" (V1).

If the discharge operation is determined to be "necessary" in step V1, the discharge operation is performed (V2), and integrated values A_a , A_b and $A(ab)$ are restored to "0" (V3).

10 The necessity/non-necessity of the discharge operation in the third process unit 100c is determined as follows.

To begin with, the area of the image already formed of yellow and magenta toners is found. This
15 area is six dots (dot positions 1, 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8) as shown in FIG. 11. This area is represented by A_{ab} . Then, the area of the cyan toner image is found. The area is four dots (dot positions 1, 2, 5 and 8) as shown in FIG. 10. This area is represented by A_c .
20 An overlapping area between the already formed image and the cyan toner image is found. As shown in FIG. 11, these toner images overlap at dot positions 1, 5 and 8, and thus the overlapping area is three dots. This area is represented by $A(abc)$.

25 If a value, which is obtained by subtracting the overlapping area $A(abc)$ of the already formed image and cyan toner image and the entire area A_c of the cyan

toner image from the entire area Aab of the already formed image, is not less than a predetermined value I_c , the discharge operation is determined to be "necessary" (V4).

5 If the discharge operation is determined to be "necessary" in step V4, the discharge operation is performed (V5), and integrated values Aab, A_c and $A(abc)$ are restored to "0" (V6).

10 The necessity/non-necessity of the discharge operation in the fourth process unit 100d is determined as follows.

 To begin with, the area of the image already formed of yellow, magenta and cyan toners is found. This area is seven dots (dot positions 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8) as shown in FIG. 11. This area is represented by Aabc. The area of the black toner image is one dot (dot position 4), and this area is represented by A_d . An overlapping area between the already formed image and the black toner image is found. As shown in FIG. 11, these toner images do not overlap at all, and thus the overlapping area is zero (0 dot). This area is represented by $A(abcd)$. In a region where a black toner image is to be formed, a clear black image formed of black toner alone is desired. Thus, in many cases, it is desirable to prevent overlapping of other color toners in the region where the black toner image is to be formed.

15

20

25

5 If a value, which is obtained by subtracting the overlapping area $A(abcd)$ of the already formed image and black toner image from the entire area Ad of the black toner image from the entire area $Aabcd$ of the already formed image, is not less than a predetermined value Id , the discharge operation is determined to be "necessary" (V7).

10 If the discharge operation is determined to be "necessary" in step V7, the discharge operation is performed (V8), and integrated values $Aabcd$, Ad and $A(abcd)$ are restored to "0" (V9).

15 Overlapping parts of toner images can be discriminated by performing AND operations for the dots corresponding in position to the image data units of yellow, magenta, cyan and black.

20 In front of each process unit, a sensor (CCD, photosensor, etc.) may be provided which directly measures the area of a composite toner image of yellow and magenta, or a composite toner image of yellow, magenta and cyan. In this case, there is no need to consider at which parts the toner images overlap.

25 As described above, double or triple integrations of overlapping parts of toner images are prevented, the area of the previously formed toner image on the paper P is exactly determined. Thereby, excessive discharge of mixed toner can be prevented.

In the present invention, the timing for

discharging the toner in the developing device, in which the toner of the previously formed toner image has mixed, is determined by comparing the integrated area of the toner image developed by the upstream-side
5 developing device and the integrated area of the toner image developed by the present developing device.

Therefore, this invention is applicable not only to a two-component toner developing method, but also to a developing method using one-component nonmagnetic or
10 magnetic toner.

The present invention is applicable to cases where the charge polarities of the toner and photosensitive drums are different.

This invention is not limited to the technique
15 wherein the operation for discharging toner from the developing device is effected by solid image printing of toner. For example, this invention is applicable to a technique wherein toner is discharged from the developing device to a waste toner box.

20 As has been described above, according to the present embodiment, it is possible to constantly maintain the toning of color tone of toner images by discharging mixed toner at a suitable timing, even if a previously formed toner image mixes in an image
25 forming section that performs a subsequent image forming operation.

Additional advantages and modifications will

readily occur to those skilled in the art. Therefore,
the invention in its broader aspects is not limited to
the specific details and representative embodiments
shown and described herein. Accordingly, various
5 modifications may be made without departing from the
spirit or scope of the general inventive concept as
defined by the appended claims and their equivalents.